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»The possibilities are endless«: progress and the taming of contingency

Katrin Bromber, Paolo Gaibazzi, Franziska Roy, Abdoulaye Sounaye, Julian Tadesse

This text¹ is written as a collective discussion paper by the research group *Progress and its Discontents – Ideas, Practices, Materiality*², and seeks to develop the notion of contingency in the historical and ethnographic study of progress. We broadly understand progress as a horizon of possibilities, a temporal blank screen upon which visions of reality can be projected by given actors. Progress can, potentially, be brought about through a set of transformative actions, which might either serve to alter or maintain the *status quo*. Building on African and Asian case studies of the 20th and 21st centuries, we will focus on the interstitial and interdependent nature of progress and possible imagined futures: that is to say, the anticipation and desire of a certain future and the possibility of its actualisation. It is this temporal dimension of progress that embeds the future in the present and makes it a valuable research topic for unravelling the underlying tendencies in the science, policy and desires of a given society or social circle.³ As progress opens up particular social concepts and practices to possibility or possible scenarios, a certain awareness of the inability to control the route to the future tends to emerge and inform the narratives of progress. In other words, in our case studies, progress as an idea and a project of social transformation is partially grounded in actors'

recognition that things could be/come otherwise. This recognition is then articulated as a specific modus to apprehend, limit, navigate or exploit the horizon of wayward, possible scenarios envisioned at a given place and time. By the term contingency, we therefore aim to capture an awareness by actors of the indeterminate nature of social life, or more specifically, a reflective mode vis-à-vis indeterminacy in the formulation of progress-related ideas and agendas, as well as their related practices of implementation. Although contingency is a basic fact of daily life, we would argue that there are moments of heightened awareness of contingency that emerge from actual or felt transitions within or concerning a given society. One could say that expected or witnessed changes give rise to a more acute feeling of contingency and the will to master the future in some way

In recent years, contingency has become an important analytical category for the study of progress, and in particular for the study of modernity. It has been noted that progress and development(alism) lie at the heart of modernity.⁴ Ideas about Progress (with a capital P) typically envisage a certain linearity and orderliness of temporality and social change, at least in Western thought since the advent of Enlightenment. A paradigmatic example from the 20th century is the modernist notion of progress, encapsulated in modernisation theory, as a linear development with a given content and goal (most commonly economic and technological advancement). Since then, historical and social analyses have gone a long way in distancing themselves from the evolu-

¹ »The Possibilities are Endless« is the title of a documentary by James Hall and Edward Lovelace, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3512066/> (accessed 26 February 2015).

² The research group consists of five projects – historical and anthropological – which are described in detail under http://www.zmo.de/forschung/index_e.html (accessed 26 February 2015).

³ This point was eloquently stressed by Ernst Bloch, 1976, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 3 vols, (3rd ed.), Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, see esp. Vol. I, 6, 12.

⁴ Arif Dirlik, »Modernity as History: Post-revolutionary China, Globalization and the Question of Modernity«, *Social History*, 27:1 (2002) 16-39.

tionary and teleological narrative of Progress, and instead describe Progress and modernity as multifaceted historical formations that arose out of a series of contingent events and circumstances, which could have yielded different outcomes and created alternative courses of history.⁵

In this paper, we adopt the term contingency to pursue a somewhat different line of inquiry. Our research views contingency as an analytical tool to shift attention away from deterministic understandings of progress. As noted, we understand progress (with a small p) in more general terms and study it primarily in non-European settings. More importantly, we are less interested in identifying contingent *events* in given historical or civilisational trajectories than in highlighting the ways in which contingency is understood and then articulated through diverse ideas, practices and sentiments that ultimately inform progress-related projects. Thus, although certain narratives of progress described in this paper may actually hinge on order and a supposed *telos*, our case studies will show how notions and perceptions of contingency contributed to delineating the space in which they emerged and became appealing to the actors involved.

Albeit at a preliminary stage of research, our projects have so far identified a variety of understandings of contingency in different epochs, places and social settings. The contingent may appear as an (or sometimes *the*) intractable element of disturbance or insecurity whose elimination is vital for the pursuit of progress. Two of the case studies concern the period following World War II. At that time, people all over the globe realised that the world was about to change; they were, however, very unsure about the direction this would take. In the Ethiopian case studied by Bromber, the recent, unprecedented experience of occupation by a foreign power (i.e. Fascist Italy in 1935-41) exacerbated anxieties among the country's political elites about Ethiopia's position and sovereignty in a new polarised world order. Preoccupations about internal struggles for power further added to external insecurity. As Bromber shows, these scenarios informed the subsequent policies for a »New Ethiopia« and a »New Man« in profound ways. They were attempts by the imperial authority to gain firm control over the country and the course of history. Emphasis on mastery and self-mastery also emerge from Roy's case study about South Asian youth and student movements. Uncertainties continued during the Cold War era, when fears not only of another impending worldwide conflict, but also of nuclear war, were coupled, at the national level, with the need for nation-build-

ing and youth (de-)mobilisation after colonisation. It is against this backdrop of crisis that the transnational activities of non-governmental actors in this period should be seen and is here studied through the lens of South Asian youth and student movements that are active at home and on international platforms during this period.

The grand ideologies and projects characteristic of the 20th Century have often generated unexpected outcomes and new contingencies. The three remaining African case studies address precisely some of the challenges people face after the end of the Cold War, and the related demise of post-colonial promises and widespread socio-economic vulnerability engendered by neoliberal globalisation. Tadesse's study of entrepreneurship programmes in Ethiopia shows that the Ethiopian state once again seeks to create confident visions of economic progress by engineering new national subjects. Through the discursive and practical promotion of »entrepreneurship«, a largely structural problem – unemployment – is framed as an attitudinal problem. The »mind-shift« required of programme participants does not simply serve to eliminate economic insecurity, but also to devise a managerial approach to such economic contingency, in the sense of being able to navigate market volatility so as to produce jobs and growth in Ethiopia. In a similar vein, Gaibazzi shows that contingency may serve to sustain, rather than hinder, models of personal and societal success. Among the Gambian Soninke men with whom he conducted research, prospects of a better future life and community are essentially linked to wealth accumulation in transnational migrant circuits of labour and trade. The cosmological notions of »luck« and fate are here relied upon not only to make sense of the vagaries of migrant livelihoods, but also to promote an ethos of adaptability and entrepreneurship. In a different West African context, religion and religiosity provide an even more central platform and idiom for the imagination of the future, setting it wide open and filled with unpredictable outcomes. Sounaye's project examines how young Salafi (Sunnance) in Niamey, Niger, take on the mission to redefine the moral and the material conditions of their lives, rejecting secular modernity as the condition of progress. Sunnance embrace moral activism and religious entrepreneurship aimed at providing them with an orderly life today, and an adequate preparation for tomorrow, thereby shifting agency for guaranteeing stability away from the state and privatising it within a moral economy geared towards a metaphysical stability, in an otherwise highly contingent and insecure environment.

A common focus of the case studies, beyond Progress and the contingent, is youth (especially young male actors) and the moral or physical self-reform proscribed for these actors. Youth emerges as a

⁵ See especially Wolfgang Knöbl, *Die Kontingenz der Moderne: Wege in Europa, Asien und Amerika*, Frankfurt am Main 2007.

central focus of state-sponsored developmental or, in the 21st century, typically in the form of social engineering projects with diverse origins beyond the confines of the state. Youth functions as a projection surface for visions of the future, as well as the most natural object and subject when it comes to implementing change thanks to it acting as a somatic bridge between present and future.⁶

Whether the contingent figures as an ally of progress or as the symptom or generator of its discontents, we have found that attempts to tame contingency are invariably at the core of progress-related dynamics. Before detailing the case studies, we, therefore, identify categories and conceptual gateways which allow for a fruitful communication and comparative analysis of contingency (more specifically, actors' awareness of contingency). Rather than conclusive answers, however, this paper delineates a terrain of inquiry and its epistemological underpinnings, hoping to invite further discussion.

Experience, expectation and the contingent: analytical premises

In philosophical usage, the contingent is defined as »what could be other because it has no necessary ground of existence«,⁷ or »that which did not have to happen«.⁸ It is in other words an element of indeterminacy that defies deterministic views of reality. In referring to contingency, however, we are less interested in philosophical takes on determinacy and occurrence than in subjecting to empirical inquiry what given social actors make of the open-endedness of their social existence. Crucially, whereas the contingent is generally understood as (ahistorical) randomness in a stochastic sense, in social and historical analysis it mainly captures, as we purport to show in this section, sources of indeterminacy located in social life, and hence, in relations, institutions, practices, imagination and affect.⁹ We use contingency as a term to describe a particular social reflexivity, in which culturally specific representations, orientations and activities have as their point of reference a certain indeterminateness of reality. We feel that »contingency« is particularly suited as a conceptual category for analysing and comparing our research materials because it provides us with an etic, umbrella-like term to discuss a wide spectrum of such socio-cultural concepts and

practices. Related terms in use in social analysis such as uncertainty, chance, risk, etc., seem to us less inclusive and more culturally biased in this respect. They often presuppose indeterminacy to be a negative or undesirable element, as indeed revealed by Euro-modernist notions of progress as order and *telos*. Contingency, by contrast, allows us a more neutral idiom for considering such emic categories that point to the open-ended quality of social existence and, in particular, of progress-related projects, while also making room for other visions and attitudes. We use it as a concept that takes a step back from contemporaneous notions of progress so as to better understand the specificities of different projects that have sought to bring about a desired future. This approach allows, too, for an archaeology of progress-related projects: a view that treats those attempts to shape the future that were short-lived or ultimately unsuccessful on a par with those that were vindicated by history.¹⁰ This then avoids the temptation of »reading history backwards«.¹¹

In the first place, the emergence of possibility and indeterminacy as salient elements of progress-related projects must be studied as a historical development. Put differently, the fact that societies place emphasis on futures and wayward possibilities, and consequently grapple with indeterminacy, should not be taken for granted, but requires historical contextualisation. The awareness of indeterminacy appears to especially characterise periods of dramatic or relatively sudden change in one way or the other. Witnessing accelerated change and thereby the inherent openness of the future seems to give rise to more fundamental ways of grappling with the future in the form of ideologies, revised forms of social semantics and socialisation. This can be noted in specific epochal historical shifts. As historian Reinhart Koselleck has pointed out, the rise of modernity (in Europe) was marked by a far-reaching engagement with the future, and more specifically with possible futures. Starting from the late 18th century, concerns and efforts were no longer solely directed at reproducing the *status quo*, thus shaping the future in the guise of the past; the future was, as it were, liberated and opened up to new possibilities, thereby compelling social actors to formulate and confront future scenarios, which in turn led to an acceleration of social change. To analyse this process, Koselleck employed two formal, abstract categories – experience and expectation – that interrelate past, present, and future, and frame human action

⁶ The intrinsic link between youth and modernity has been a matter of scholarly studies, but we will not go into details concerning that aspect in the present paper.

⁷ Michael Makropoulos, »Crisis and Contingency Two Categories of the Discourse of Classical Modernity«, *Thesis Eleven*, 111:1 (2012), 12.

⁸ Thomas M. Malaby, »Our Present Misfortune: Games and the Post-Bureaucratic Colonization of Contingency«, *Social Analysis*, 56:2 (2012), 104.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* [transl. by AM Sheridan Smith], London (1st ed. 1972), 1995.

¹¹ Especially see Frederick Cooper's remarks on »History and Political Imagination« in »Africa's Pasts and Africa's Historians«, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 34:2 (2000), 312.

with respect to time.¹² He insisted that experience and expectation are not binaries, but an interdependent couple: the two together simultaneously constitute history as well as peoples' cognition of history. He argued further that »experience is *present past*, whose events can be incorporated and can be remembered« through a process of permanent reworking of individual and »alien« experiences.¹³ Assuming the past as total – as diverse interpenetrating and overlapping layers of time – the author speaks of the »space of experience« (*Erfahrungsraum*). »Expectation« – both individual and interpersonal – is »*future made present*«.¹⁴ Expectation is directed at the non-experienced, but confronts a limit, which Koselleck called the »horizon of expectation« (*Erwartungshorizont*). This incorporates hopes, fears, rational predictions, speculations, etc.¹⁵

In the modern period, while experience and expectation remain linked, they are growing progressively apart from each other due to the rapid transformations that take place. The horizon of expectation is distanced from the space of experience, in the sense that the future is not a projection of the past, but a constellation of possibilities largely not previously experienced. Interestingly, in this period, ideas of progress, with their underlying doctrine of perfection, endowed the horizon of expectation »with a coefficient of change that advances in step with time«.¹⁶ These ideas did not only anticipate the future as being different. They projected the future as being created by human agents.

Whereas Koselleck's approach provides the analytical ground for an investigation of progress in terms of experience and expectation, his treatment of contingency remains cursory. One may nevertheless observe that the disjuncture between experience and expectation at the foundation of (European) modernity posits the future as a possibility – as such, the future can »always be other« and cannot be predicted. Indeed, as philosopher Michael Makropoulos has shown, the rupture between experience and expectation may not solely give rise to an over-proliferation of possibilities and the inability to know what to expect of the future. But, he argues, in the Weimar Republic (1920s), contingency was experienced in such a fundamental way that it shattered all notions of relative certainty or reasonable expectations.¹⁷

The catastrophic dissolution of the (bourgeois) world view caused by World War I had rendered the impossible possible. Reality itself came to be perceived as contingent, thus making past experience and models irrelevant for designing or predicting the future. At the same time, with reality being seen as intrinsically malleable to human agency; there was ample room for ideas of total (or even totalitarian) change and a society dreamt up at the drawing board. The uneasiness at the perceived openness of the future to uncontrollable, cataclysmic scenarios also nurtured longings for order, often combined with a demand for a preliminary *tabula rasa* – sentiments which informed in complex ways the following period of totalitarian rule in Germany.

An important point here is that indeterminacy is an inherent element of the social, political and economic fabric of given historical contexts, or even of their cosmological order as a whole.¹⁸ Similar to Bloch,¹⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre views contingency as a permanent element of human life, something which originates both from within the self and from social interaction.²⁰ This poses a challenge to any deterministic understanding of social reality, which have so far prevailed in the historical and social sciences, and invites further investigation of the role of indeterminacy in shaping not only institutions and systems of thought, but also mundane practices and habits. Operationalising MacIntyre's insights,²¹ anthropologist Thomas Malaby has proposed analysing indeterminacy on an ontological level as part of the »chanceful quality of experience«. He points to various ways of understanding the relationships between (one's own) action and experience or outcomes. These different attitudes are:

... the product of the always moving meeting point between open-ended experience oriented toward the future and the irretrievable past. And they entail both the project of meaning making in the wake of the unexpected as well as practical dispositions that shape engagements in the fraught moments of indeterminacy themselves.²²

Albeit in a different fashion to Koselleck and Makropoulos, Malaby also stresses that contingency emerges between future-oriented experience (or expectation) and past experience. However, he additionally locates the contingent in daily life

¹² According to Koselleck they are formal because »what is experienced and what is expected at any one time cannot be deduced from the categories themselves.« Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, New York, 2004, 256.

¹³ Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 259, emphasis added.

¹⁴ Ibid., emphasis added.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 266.

¹⁷ Makropoulos, »Crises and Contingency«, 9-18.

¹⁸ Thomas M. Malaby, *Gambling Life: Dealing in Contingency in a Greek City*, Champaign, 2003, 16.

¹⁹ Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*.

²⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (3rd ed.), Notre Dame, 2007, 93-105.

²¹ Malaby, *Gambling Life*, 14-6.

²² Malaby, »Our Present Misfortune«, 104.

and social interaction, and focuses attention not only on visions and ideas, but also on the signifying practices and the practical dispositions that engage with it.²³ Therefore, another strength of using contingency as a concept lies in its leading away from any simplistic re-narration of a modernisation (or post-modernisation) drama in which a supposed loss of security, certainty and social alienation necessarily lead to romanticist nostalgia, nationalism and a yearning for order. Instead, contingency highlights the multiplicity of possible practices and attitudes – as well as the possible coeval existence of such attitudes – towards the open-endedness of the world. It steers research towards asking questions of why and how certain attitudes emerge, which also makes this framework particularly amenable to a comparative analysis of all those socio-cultural and economic factors that shape evolving dispositions towards contingency, including manipulation by politicians or elites, governmentality, popular cultural beliefs and practices.

In sum, employing contingency as an analytical tool appears to make room for the formulation of relevant research questions in relation to projects of progress on at least three, interrelated levels. Firstly, we need to understand the *historical and epistemic shifts* in which possibilities and possible futures emerge at the (dis)juncture between experience and expectation, past and future. And hence: under what historical conditions does the awareness of contingency emerge as a significant element of progress, and in which forms? Secondly, we are interested in understanding how given societal contexts understand and deal with contingency, how they frame it as an *element of social projects of progress*. In this respect, we pay attention to the specific institutional context in which discourses of the contingent are generated and circulated in relation to future possibilities and trajectories. This often relates to practices of the state, especially in the 20th century but can also refer to social networks, a focus more prevalent in the post-modern and post-industrial age as can be seen from the case studies already. Thirdly, we are interested in the ways in which these predicaments of the contingent shape and are shaped by dispositions and habits through which indeterminacy is engaged in *everyday social praxis*.²⁴

23 See also: Elizabeth Cooper and David Pratten, »Ethnography of Uncertainty in Africa: An Introduction«, in Elizabeth Cooper and David Pratten (eds.), *Ethnography of Uncertainty in Africa*, New York, 2015, 1-2.

24 Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 262. Koselleck elaborates on this point with regard to prognosis which is derived from experience and discloses expectations including hopes, fears, etc.

Taming Contingency: Between Mastery and Embrace

The following case studies illustrate how contingency may be productively investigated at one or more levels of analysis, and in particular show ways in which contingency is tamed in the pursuit of progress. We use the term »taming« because, as we purport to show, ideas and practices of progress do not simply acknowledge contingency, but actively grapple with it – albeit without necessarily subduing it.²⁵ Taming contingency may be attempted by constructing meanings and notions, prescribing specific responses and attitudes, devising practices and relationships, and entrusting to specific actors the responsibility of coming to terms with it.

Our case studies are situated in different historical, geographical, and socio-cultural contexts. These include East Africa and South Asia in the interwar and post-World War II period (Roy, Bromber) and West and East Africa in the post-Cold War and neoliberal period (Gaibazzi, Sounaye, Tadesse). Thus, the case studies deal with the aftermath of the three major global confrontations – eras which are particularly prone to intense and urgent attempts to come to terms with uncertainty and possibility – and seen through the lens of the (post) colonial »periphery«. These are then not only eras, but also areas that lend themselves well to investigations of the reformulation of and discontent with post-Enlightenment notions of progress and (post-)Cold War understandings of development. While we seek to highlight the diverse modalities for taming contingency, in what follows we still proceed in a chronological order for we feel that the historical specificities, as well as continuities and discontinuities, of such practices should be clearly outlined.

One way of taming contingency is to attempt to eliminate it altogether. The period of the late 19th and 20th century provides striking examples of such an approach to contingency. At that time, the desire to master contingency became embodied in a belief in scientific inquiry that, if applied to societies or civilisations, should be able to unravel the laws of social and human progress.²⁶ The era is also marked by what Foucault described as thinking from the apocalypse, i.e. history being viewed from some »logical« end point to which it was in-

25 The term is inspired by the work of Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance*, which shows that modern history was not only characterised by an opening toward possible futures, but also by a domestication of chance by employing statistics and probability as techniques of governmentality and the definition of norms. Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance*. Cambridge, 1990.

26 Michael Bentley, 2013, »The Turn Towards »Science«: Historians Delivering Untheorized Truth« in Nancy Parker/ Sarah Foot (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Historical Theory*, London, 10-22.

exorably steering.²⁷ As noted above, nowhere is this more evident than in the totalising tendencies that informed narratives of progress and utopian political projects during the interwar period. As Makropoulos shows, the concern with restoring order, certainty and directionality is part and parcel of the modernist project, and could be detected in the writings of different political thinkers, ranging from the radical left to the far right.²⁸

Albeit in different ways, totalising tendencies continued to inform projects of sociopolitical progress well after World War II. In this period, indeterminacy and uncertainty vis-à-vis future scenarios was perhaps most palpable in the spectre of an impending world conflict and of nuclear annihilation during the Cold War period. At the same time, and partly because of these factors, this was a period of self-confident mastery over contingency, most evident in grand narratives of supreme ideological struggles and the values they represented. The future was projected as being better and made by men²⁹ (and their technical innovations). Irrespective of the quality or mode of the advancement – gradual or revolutionary (or impossible) – these tendencies served and still serve to legitimate political projects. Katrin Bromber's study on body politics in Ethiopia in the first, but especially in the second half of the twentieth century is a good case in point. Until 1935, the country had proudly managed to keep its independence and was a symbol in Africa for freedom from colonialism. Hesitation by the League of Nations, of which Ethiopia had been a member, in the face of Italian aggression was a deep disappointment for Emperor Haile Sillase. Since he had fled Ethiopia during the war and was later able to return only with the help of British Imperial Forces, the emperor was no longer sure he would be able to rule. Intellectuals, as well as Haile Sillase himself, were aware of the country's backwardness. Thus, the proclamation of a »New Era« in Ethiopian history 1941, reminiscent of tabula rasa attempts elsewhere, meant to strengthen the Emperor's rule against external and internal threats, as well as achieve social development and economic progress in order to become an equal player in the international arena.

The envisioned future was »New Ethiopia«; a strong, internationally recognised, modernised quasi-feudal system³⁰ with the Emperor at the

apex. A developmental framework, which had already emerged before the occupation by attempts to emulate Meiji Imperial Japan, became central to this political aim. Centralisation and, thus, »neutralising« his internal enemies was part of Sillase's tabula rasa modernisation project, which started immediately after his return from British exile. On the external front, he continued his policy of not relying on one specific ideological or political strand for support, especially when Britain, the United States and increasingly the Soviet Union made attempts to re-order the Horn of Africa. Thus, Haile Sillase worked with a wide range of foreign partners and experts, making use of the development aid boom after World War II. Arguably, what Frederick Cooper³¹ described as »modernising« colonialism for the British and the French Empires in Africa after World War II, was not so different from what might be called »modernising« imperialism for Ethiopia. In order to implement his goals, the emperor needed an avant-garde, which had to be transformed from loyal subjects into responsible citizens.

Thus, the progressive young male became the primary object of social engineering. The »New Man« of Ethiopia had to be a good soldier, politically interested, responsible with regards to the nation and open to Africa and the world. Hence, progress in Bromber's project focusses on the aspect of development through the disciplining of human bodies in order to serve a hegemonic, imperial project. In the educational sector, expatriates from various countries worked in schools and training institutions of the armed forces, in betterment homes, in volunteer organisations like the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) or the Boy Scouts, but also in ministries and other regulating bodies. Striving for bodily »advancement« through a state-monitored body-cult developed, on the one hand, into a mentality of normative fitness manifesting itself in all socio-cultural spheres (including popular culture) and, on the other, into a growing militarisation of Ethiopian society. Sport and defence, be it against human weakness or external and internal enemies, merged into a discourse of the fit soldier or athlete as a fighting machine.

The available documents, such as newspapers, journals and archival materials allow for the study of an official discourse. But this discourse only partly reveals the »athletic turn« in the 1960s. For the radical Ethiopian students of the 1960s, the soldier-like bodily fitness became a prerequisite for fighting imperialism in general and Ethiopian imperialism in particular. In contrast to the body concepts promoted by popular (imperial) culture, their anti-imperialist ideas of bodily »advancement« came very close to the »Socialist New Man«

²⁷ Michel Foucault, »Nietzsche, die Genealogie, die Historie«, in idem, *Von der Subversion zum Wissen*, München, 1974, 83-109, see esp. 95-96.

²⁸ Makropoulos, »Crisis and Contingency«

²⁹ The conceptualisation of the productive/transformative role of men and the re-productive role of women is a matter that deserves more attention during this period especially as it was also marked by a new wave of emancipation.

³⁰ Whether it was a transformation towards an absolute monarchy, though a centralised rather than a feudal one, is still a matter of debate.

³¹ Frederick Cooper, *Out of Empire: Redefining Africa's Place in the World*, Göttingen, 2013.

à la Mao or that of Cuban guerrilla fighters.³² Thus, the »unexpected outcome« was that mental and bodily »advancement«, plus the growing militarisation of the society, brought about a radicalisation which, in the end, resulted in an opposing tabula rasa approach, sweeping away the empire and opting for socialism as a radical alternative. Only a few people, if any, could have anticipated such an outcome in 1941 when the emperor had proclaimed the »New Era« for Ethiopia.

The turn from imperialist centralisation to socialism has, of course, been seen in the context of the Cold War that, on the surface, divided the world neatly into a Western and an Eastern Bloc plus its satellites. The period introduced a new kind of contingency awareness, for during the Cold War, it was not a specific nation or state whose survival was at stake but the future of mankind itself. At the Bandung Conference of 1955, Nehru argued that any aggression at the present would lead to a global conflagration and nuclear annihilation. He then declared all pre-nuclear experience and old maxims of action, which present leaders still clung to, to be utterly useless now.³³ It was at Bandung that the philosophy of non-alignment was first espoused, yet non-alignment, too, grew out of inter-war anti-colonial networks and retained some of those structures and spirit. The cold-war world was, after all, still in a process of decolonisation that required careful manoeuvring. Both blocs, in turn, came to see the »Third World« as critical areas whose eventual allegiance might tip the balance in favour of one side or the other. Franziska Roy's study traces various youth groups whose role in society had been similar to that outlined above by Bromber: the nationalist movement had portrayed them as civilian soldiers and torchbearers of progress.³⁴ In the aftermath of the bloody partition of British-India student and youth groups had to be demobilised by the new states of India and Pakistan and their energy channelled into nation-building instead. During the Cold-War period, such groups also acted at times as unofficial »cultural attachés«. South Asian youth and student groups participated in various international platforms, some of which were communist fronts (like the World Federation of Democratic Youth, or the In-

ternational Union of Students). Others were sponsored by agents in the Western Bloc including the CIA and British IRD in conjunction with MI5 (like the World Assembly of Youth and its various affiliates). By tracing cultural actors below the official state level who navigated the binary global order, this work complicates the paradigm of non-alignment and cultural front politics in the post-colonial. The contention here is that by looking at the few available official documents from the postcolonial states and delving into the cultural side of the Cold War, much can be learnt about the complicated semi-political alliances forged during the era that are beyond the purview of International Relations Studies. Diplomacy via cultural networks should, however, not be underestimated. These contacts, and flows of money from private foundations acting on behalf of intelligence and state actors (famously, the Rockefeller and Ford foundations), add an important dimension to our understanding of the overall international dynamic of the period.

The shift from nationalist struggle to state-building and different geopolitical concerns changed notions of what makes for ideal citizens and the characteristics required of them (as far as the state, as well as actors within civil society were concerned) changed, too. Many ideals regarding the soldier-citizen and a required technique of the self (such as striving for selflessness and self-perfection) were, however, carried into the post-colonial era. The end of the Cold War, and the subsequent expansion of the capitalist market, together with the crumbling of the grand narrative of modernity, brought to the fore other configurations of contingency and modalities for taming it. In many ways, looking at contingency and related concepts elucidates the sharp paradoxes of the post-Cold War period. Research in Africa, the site of the three remaining case studies, illustrates this.

Since the 1990s, a simultaneous shuttering and opening of the horizons of expectations has occurred in Africa. On the one hand, contingency in the form of economic insecurity and political instability has been a haunting presence in African lives. On the other, Africans have been concurrently exposed to a wider horizon of life possibilities, modernities and avenues to wealth which, in line with a culture of neoliberalism, place emphasis on a positive engagement with uncertain realities through speculative investment, the enterprising self and an active engagement with chance.³⁵ While expectations of modernity, especially in the form of development, still pervade African ideas of

32 Katrin Bromber, »Muscular Christianity: The Role of the Ethiopian YMCA Sports in Shaping »Modern« Masculinities (1950s-1970s)«, *SDALC*, 2013, 47: 41.

33 Cf. Speech to Bandung Conference Political Committee, 1955 by Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1955nehru-bandung2.html> (accessed 24 January 2015, reprinted in George M. Kahin, *The Asian-African Conference*, Ithaca, NY, 1956, 64-72).

34 See on British-Indian youth movements and their overarching paramilitary nature also Franziska Roy, »The Torchbearers of Progress: Youth, Volunteer Organisations and National Discipline in India, c. 1918-1947« (PhD, Warwick University, 2013).

35 Jean Comaroff, and John L. Comaroff, »Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming«, in Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (eds.), *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, Durham, 2001, 1-56.

progress,³⁶ a widespread sense of the open-ended, unpredictable nature of the future has therefore yielded other ideas of progress, as well.

Neoliberal reforms and ensuing economic uncertainty have made livelihoods a poignantly contingent endeavour for numerous ordinary Africans, particularly for the many young people stuck in »waithood«, in the transition between youth and adulthood.³⁷ Nevertheless, youth in Africa are not just passively waiting for their lives to change, but they pursue different strategies to prevail in the face of adversity. Daniel Mains' anthropological study of unemployed youth in urban Ethiopia discusses the consequences of the seemingly unattainable aspirations of young males. He highlights the contradictory situation of a generation that has improved access to education and information – hallmarks of modernisation – but still finds it hard to make »progress« in their social lives. Despite evoking the idea that young men's »hope is cut«, Mains shows how they apply different approaches to achieve progress on an individual level, understood here as »improvement over time«. These strategies can include seeking support in »reciprocal« relations of friendship or a »spatial fix to a temporal problem«, i.e. pursuing or imagining a future outside Ethiopia.³⁸ Indeed, in many parts of Africa taming uncertainty has resulted in narratives of progress and success that are increasingly linked to a »global horizon« of migrant destinations.

If, in some cases, the failure of given trajectories of progress and the experience of uncertainty have re-directed expectations elsewhere, in other cases the very same trajectories have been reformed in order to create new possible futures. Still concerning Ethiopia, Julian Tadesse's study of entrepreneurship programmes is an example of a government trying to manage heightened expectations regarding the future, which have been created by an expanding educational system but are at the same time threatened by the inability of the labour market to absorb the increasing number of university graduates. Progress in this context appears to be closely linked to concrete visions of a more prosperous future, spelled out in the government's Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP), which aims to elevate the country to a middle-income status. The GTP, like other plans of this type,

is managed in a top-down, authoritarian mode and projects a vision of linear development to which there is no alternative. Nevertheless, uncertainty persists, and attempts to shape the future and eliminate contingency have a tendency to produce the opposite effect, too. A case in point is the connection between the expansion of the education system to produce a future vanguard in Ethiopia and youth unemployment described in more detail below. Unemployed graduates become a liability for the legitimacy of the development project. For one, the state agenda promises economic benefits and continuous growth for society as a whole. On the other, university graduates are projected as model citizens and human capital who are exhorted to »unleash« their »full potential« for the sake of Progress. Thus, unemployed graduates pose a paradox to the narrative of developmentalism.

To elaborate on this point, providing some details will be necessary: Youth have been one focal point of attention in the developmental agenda. Evidence can be found in the massive expansion of the Ethiopian education system from the end of the 1990s onward, and, in more explicit forms, of mobilisation through youth organisations and government development programmes. However, the outcome of such efforts does not always conform to the government's desired results and expectations. An example of such inherent contingencies is the case of the expansion of the educational sector, which exhibits a mismatch of graduates' skills and industry needs, as well as the inability of the labour market to absorb the growing number of graduates. In order to manage the unanticipated consequences of educational expansion, graduates are encouraged to start their own entrepreneurial ventures. Thus, »Entrepreneurship« has become a buzzword that is framed as the answer to youth unemployment. Donor-funded training programmes have been established to equip the target group with the necessary skills and to facilitate entrepreneurship. Fundamentally, however, their goal is to bring about a »mind-shift« that will turn »job-seekers into job-creators« (as a government official proclaimed at the launch of one such programme). These training programmes could well be seen as part of a »contingency plan« to ease pressure on the government to provide jobs. In fact, here the burden is reversed, that is, young graduates are expected to create jobs for others. Moreover, by emphasising the necessity of an attitudinal change in the target group, a structural problem is transformed into a question of individual mentality. What is more, by their very nature, these programmes do not serve simply to reduce insecurity and unemployment, but also to prepare youth to participate and succeed in a globalised economy. That is to say, they envision, in a typical neoliberal fashion, the global market as the repository of progress. Since notions of risk and risk

36 James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*. Berkeley, 1999.

37 Alcinda Honwana, »Waithood«: Youth transitions and social change«, in Dick Foeken, Ton Dietz, Leo de Haan and Linda Johnson (eds.), *Development and Equity: An Interdisciplinary Exploration by Ten Scholars from Africa, Asia and Latin America*, Leiden, 2014, 19-27.

38 Daniel Mains, *Hope is Cut: Youth, Unemployment, and the Future in Urban Ethiopia*. Global Youth. Philadelphia, 2011, 4.

management are central to contemporary forms of flexible accumulation, this sanctions a radical re-orientation of attitudes towards contingency.

This leads us to explore the other side of the coin of the current period, namely new horizons of possibility and the positive evaluation of indeterminacy in addressing highly contingent lives. The anthropologist Charles Piot shows that trading the past for an uncertain future has been a prominent development in West Africa since the fall of the Berlin Wall.³⁹ A number of social movements have proliferated which portray the past and »tradition« as irrelevant or unsuitable to progress in life. Rather, they exhort West Africans to be open to the possibilities of the present and the future. Amongst the most readily available examples of this are religious movements such as Pentecostal Christianity and reformist Islam, both of which advocate in different ways for a radical »break with the past«.⁴⁰ Abdoulaye Sounaye's study of Islamic preaching practices among youth in Niger asks if the Sannance, reformist Muslims promoting the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, are the result of an »unexpected development« of the Izala reform movement insofar as their preaching is even becoming anti-Izala. In embracing Islamic reform, young Sannance have found the resources and opportunities to break away from particular temporalities, to escape destined futures and to create the conditions for an alternative social project.

In this context, religion and religiosity offer new opportunities (economic, social, political) while expanding the horizon of possibilities. Sannance youth champion a project that is based on refashioning the self and reconstructing their community. Taking inspiration from models and norms they find in the Islamic tradition and using preaching, a key platform of their intervention in the public arena, they popularise religious ideas and social practices, which are gradually transforming urban religiosity and life conditions. In this way, they are not just passive recipients of the state's version of history and the plans society has for them; they break free and escape from many forms of social control as they question, challenge and even reinvent the conduct required of them. Illustrating a form of Muslim modernity⁴¹, within the confines of their religious communities, between social structures and their imagined futures, the Sannance redraw the normative and political lines that demarcate generations while they create alternative conditions for moral progress and setting their

own futures free. In their attempts to avoid *bid'a* (unlawful innovations) by following in the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad, they seek authenticity, correct modes of behavior and a moral tune-up to protect against this *Things-Falling-Apart* era. The moral activism, media practices and sociabilities that develop around preaching among the Sannance open a window to prospects for domesticating the contingent, regaining control over individual life trajectories and consequently redressing the course of history. While rejecting life paths brought into existence by social spaces and practices, engaging with the Sunna opens possibilities for youth to enjoy mobility and social becoming.⁴² It also provides these possibilities to other social categories. Thus, unsatisfied with what they are offered, Sannance youth retool it, deploy it and use it to attempt to domesticate what may seem beyond their control. In that sense, Sannance youth are not necessarily *off-siders*, mere recipients of norms produced and maintained for them, but builders and shifters who rely on religion to bricolage their lives—all while navigating the tensions that emerge at the intersection of their aspirations, their social conditions and their implementation of an Islamic revival agenda.

That taming contingency does not necessarily involve constraining and managing is evident in the proliferation of practices that, in Africa as elsewhere, embrace the forces of contingency in form of gambling, lotteries, occult practices, etc. However, while these phenomena certainly reflect the neoliberal predicament of an explorative, perpetually reinventing self,⁴³ they also build on a long-standing engagement with indeterminacy. In Africa, these include various techniques of divination and witchcraft that probe causal forces inherently thought to lie beyond human control.⁴⁴ Paolo Gaibazzi shows that these engagements do not necessarily fall under a management approach to contingency. His work deals with Soninke men in the Gambia who have developed an attitude marked by openness and the embracing of indeterminacy⁴⁵. In this setting, the prevalent model for personal and collective progress can be described as the »big man« kind, whereby men are supposed to strive

39 Charles Piot, *Nostalgia for the Future: West Africa after the Cold War*, Chicago, 2010.

40 Among others: Marloes Janson, *Islam, Youth and Modernity in the Gambia: The Tablighi Jama'at*, Cambridge, 2013.

41 Ousmane Kane, *Muslim Modernity in Postcolonial Nigeria: A Study of the Society for the Removal and Reinstatement of Tradition*, Boston, 2003.

42 Catrine Christiansen, Mats Utas and Henrik E. Vigh (eds.), *Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood: Social Becoming in an African Context*, Uppsala, 2006, and Piotr Sztopka, *Society in Action: The Theory of Social Becoming*, Chicago, 1991.

43 Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, »Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony«, *American Ethnologist* 26:2 (1999), 279-303.

44 Knut Graw, »Locating Nganiyo: Divination as Intentional Space«, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 36:1 (2006), 78-119.

45 Cf. Marco Di Nunzio, »Embracing Uncertainty: Young People on the Move in Addis Ababa's Inner City«, in Cooper and Pratten, *Ethnographies*, 2015.

for wealth in order to support and enlarge their families and their clienteles. This is not an atavistic, static model, but one influenced by, and reproduced in, other narratives of progress, primarily that of socioeconomic development. Communities thus expect their »big men« to contribute to community development along with other actors such as NGOs and the state. For generations, aspirations of economic accumulation have been linked to international circuits of labour and trade migration, which have scattered Soninke travellers to diverse destinations worldwide. Central to the economy and culture of migration is that travelling often involves unexpected detours in the pursuit of economic opportunities and to avert perils and unpredictable impasses. Rather than simply being considered as insecurity, however, the uncertainty of travel is also thought to be auspicious, for it potentially brokers new routes to fortune. Soninke men capture the contingent unfolding of their trajectories toward success by making reference to »luck«. This is not necessarily a chance event, but rather an element of Islamic destiny. Whilst this is bestowed by God at unknown times and in unknown forms, men must also proactively search for »luck«. According to Gaibazzi, there is no distinct set of skills for dealing with the contingent nature of »luck« other than a cultivated disposition of receptiveness and serendipity toward the open-ended nature of migratory life. This disposition is paradoxically sustained by an ethic of hard work, self-discipline and endurance inculcated in rural men from a young age. Hard work does not simply lead to accumulation and prosperity (in a deterministic fashion), but also fosters an ability to adapt and to remain alert to the unpredictable twists and turns during the search for »luck«. Therefore, even though in this socio-cultural context, contingency may appear as being untamed, it still crystallises into a certain normative view of life and masculinity.

Concluding thoughts

At this point we would like to briefly return to the aim of our group: to identify conceptual loci and modes which allow our projects to communicate in a comparative way. The nexus of experience, expectation and contingency works with categories that are not only abstract enough to allow for comparison, but are also relevant for both anthropological and historical conceptual thinking. It goes without saying that every individual case has to be studied with the question »Why at this very moment in this very place by this very actor?« When we examine earlier periods, say the 20th century, we might make out patterns in the way people tended to deal with contingency in a time and place in which the latter might be perceived as troubling and requiring management. This would mean that comparisons between mainstream at-

titudes towards contingency and everyday practices relating to it in different periods and contexts might elucidate what factors go into shaping these attitudes. In the case of contemporary East and West Africa, economic deprivation, an education sector not well aligned with the economy or people's needs, as well as a rhetoric of self-making by embracing uncertain futures, might be relevant factors, whereas in times of economic prosperity and anticipated development, an orientation of the »haves« toward contingency management or elimination might make sense. Major shifts in political economic systems or world views might also spur a perceived need to re-order the world and to re-orient oneself within it.

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